pussycat, pussycat, where have you been?

Thom Pigaga*
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Abstract

The walls were green, light green, a thick oily green that looked as if it would smear off in his hands. He kept his hands in his pockets...
pussycat, pussycat, where have you been?
—thom pigaga

THE WALLS were green, light green, a thick oily green that looked as if it would smear off in his hands. He kept his hands in his pockets. The hallways were long, the doors painted faces, open or closed jaws. Steps. The sound of his steps.

"Can I help you," she had said.
"Er . . . uh . . . yes. I'm looking for a Karl Hoff. I was told he was here. I came to see him for just a minute."

"Please, I've got to see him. He was a friend of mine. And I heard he was here."

"No. Absolutely not, he won't be seeing anyone for quite some time." Her starched white cap had bobbed when she said it, and she had looked like some kind of disapproving clown. He stifled a giggle. But that was interesting, think of it! a nurse looking like a clown! But she wasn't trying to be funny, the way she held on to the counter and looked up into his face. Was she sneering? Or did she just have better things to do?

He remembered he had mumbled a few words of apology and shuffled off. He had to show her he knew what she meant, so he had slumped, his hands into his pockets, and moped his way out the door.

The walls were green, sliding past. He looked inside a few doors, jerking his head as he went by. Sunlight wheeling, spangled, slashed through the blinds and left irregular bars crossed on the walls, the floor. There were hushed figures in the rooms, quiet droning voices and white, always white in the rooms. Like animals, he watched them, like animals caught and waiting their time. The smells of alcohol, so slimy and deathly clean, rose up against him, horrid shapes appearing in the back corners of his eyes, and he bent his
neck to carefully watch each foot across the dull tile, keeping an equally fearful distance from each door. The doors, and unknown surly nurses waiting to take him back.

Of course there had been other doors besides the front, food doors, emergency entrances. Well hell! why worry? He'd be looking for his sick aunt or his father or Mrs. Jackson or somebody. Of course there had been other doors, and all you had to do was look busy, you had people to see. Oh, isn't this the way? I'm sorry. I'm looking for this person or that or Aunt Mary, somebody. Why yes, is that the way? Thank you very much. And he'd walk on. Easy as that.

He felt a noise, strong and affirmative, behind a door somewhere back of him. Like a tiny discovered animal, his whole frame quivered and he scurried on. His brows beetled up and strands of long black hair fell into his face. It wasn't too long, no it really wasn't so long and it was neat. It would do, wouldn't it? His mother had frowned but she hadn't said anything. He shook his head and it all fell back into place. His body hunched over again and he kept his eyes flashing this way and that and this. It couldn't be much farther, no not too much farther.

Once when he had been a few years younger, was it at his cousin's house? His cousin and he had sneaked up to the back of the sideshow-carnival in town that summer. They didn't have any money so they had sneaked in behind a tent because they couldn't have asked Aunt Mary because of course Aunt Mary wouldn't have liked them going. Uncle Henry maybe but not her. And they had had the best time and it was free and they had kept a ready eye for someone to kick them out but they hadn't been caught and they'd had the best time. Yeah, that was the most fun watching for that somebody, but right behind was all the great things they'd seen because where else could you go besides a carnival to see all that, the funny-shaped lizards, the dead things in jars. And they hadn't said anything about it, ever, not to anybody but the guys.

He dug into his dungarees pocket and drew out a crackling-wrapper piece of gum. Wheeling at the noise, he searched the length of the hall for the sound of steps, flicked the wrapper away, and started to scan the door numbers ahead of him. . . . 1307 . . . 1312. It couldn't be far, it couldn't be. He could tell the guys something after all.

1327. The numbers stood out on the dull finish of the
door with wild torchlight-shifting with flags and near forgotten cries. Somewhere far off, the tiny excited voice of a radio, muffled in its Barker's tone. Open the door, go ahead, open it . . . slowly slowly. . . . Voices coming out—where? He scraped his way through the tiny opening and pushed it shut. Had he shut it too fast, God not too loud please? There were fading footsteps. He turned . . .

The blinds slashed the same dark bars across the white spidered figure on the bed. White bands, over his chest, his legs, over his arms, and wrists, and nameless tubes and bottles everywhere. There were white sterile mittens on the shaking hands and it drooled onto its chin, down onto the bedclothes, stained already.

"Karl." A whisper, he padded over to the bed.

The shrouded figure rustled, then turned its empty eyes to the sound. It drooled, spittle running, and God yes! all those needle marks tracking the arms, tiny pimples and scars. Then it was true. He hadn't known for sure, but there it was. Wait till the guys heard about it, needle marks and straps and all. The stares met and the white bound stare of the figure on the bed turned to open-eyed fear. The mouth was opened and was mumbling, chocolate, chocolate or something or other and quietly sobbing.

"Karl," again a whisper. "I came down . . . the nurse, well she gave me a little static. The others wanted to come but they had . . ." Well listen dammit, you shrunken little — — — wait a minute. Karl was almost two years older and he'd always been so much bigger than the rest of the guys. He looked so small, like some butterfly pinned into a cigar box lid. But . . . what to say? How? He looked at the tables, bottles, bottles everywhere. The figure had turned its shaking head and sank into the pillow, staring at, was it the sunlight through the spaces of the venetian blind. Mumbling, always mumbling, something far off and punctuated and on and on. He looked at his watch, his feet, the bed. It was time to go; there were more stops to make. If he didn't want to see anybody, that was his choice. Everybody wanted to know, all he wanted was to see . . . well hell, leave him then. If it hadn't been for that newspaper clipping, they'd never heard of it anyway, and he wouldn't have volunteered to take this stupid trip. They didn't remember much, not after a year-and-a-half. . . . He took a last glance around the room, then ducked backwards out the door. A sign pointed out a stairway and he headed that way. Descending.